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ABSTRACT

A national standard for measurement of reference service would help librarians. Such statistics are necessary for evaluation of interlibrary cooperation in reference, but keeping statistics is time consuming and difficult. Librarians need a new way to quantify the work involved in answering a reference question. An improved format, applied nationally, could eliminate many problems. (PF)

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THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN'S NEED FOR MEASURES OF REFERENCE

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Measurement of reference services poses a difficult dilemma for reference supervisors. On one hand, we share a need for measures of reference with higher administrative levels. We need a means of evaluating the quality of the service we offer, of judging how well we are fulfilling our goals and of pinpointing where improvement is needed. The addition of reference to interlibrary loan networks and the trend toward making the public library the information center of the community are two of many current developments which have the potential to change the character of public library reference service. These are changes which have implications far beyond the boundaries of a single library. They are expensive services to provide, yet we have no means of measuring and evaluating them. If we have no way to determine where we are, how ever can we plan where to go? On the other hand, reference supervisors have the direct responsibility for the collection of reference statistics and therefore must deal with the fact that, although the success of any measurement program depends to a great extent on the cooperation of the librarians or others who are collecting the statistics, reference librarians are traditionally indifferent, and often even hostile, to statistical measures of reference.

I support the idea of a national program for the measurement of reference. I believe also that if reference librarians are involved from beginning to end in the development of the measures, if their problems and feelings are given full consideration it will be possible to overcome their objections and administer a successful measurement program.

Reference librarians have many conscious and subconscious reasons for their hostility to quantitative measures of reference. I would like to discuss two major groups of these today. The first set of reasons is based upon a philosophy of reference shared by most reference librarians. We view reference as an art, not a science, and we feel, therefore, that any attempt to analyze and evaluate it solely on the basis of statistical measures will miss much of the essence of reference. According to this view, any plans for action or improvement of reference based solely on statistics might miss

the mark completely. Furthermore, reference librarians feel threatened. They fear that the adoption of national measures of reference may eventually mean that their worth will be based entirely, or in large part, on how many reference questions they can answer in a month. Unfortunately, this fear is not really an idle one. Practically every reference librarian with experience in different libraries has encountered a cataloging department where a quota is put on each cataloger each month as to how many books they are to catalog and where individual catalogers readily admit that they put aside more difficult original cataloging until they are assured that they can meet that month's quota. Now obviously this throws fear in the hearts of reference librarians, for patrons unlike books, would object strongly to being set aside because their question is too difficult, too time consuming, and would mess up the month's statistics.

While I do not expect that these fears and hostile feelings will disappear overnight, I do believe that if this committee is able to create a framework for the measurement of reference which stresses the importance of both quantitative measures and qualitative evaluation, reference supervisors will find it much easier to gain the support of their staffs.

The second set of objections which reference librarians have to reference statistics is based upon a lack of time and on the practical problem of keeping statistics. Unlike many other library functions, reference work does not involve sets of procedures which are to be followed in a preestablished order. The nature of the question, the patron, the time allowed to answer the question, and the resources available all play a part in determining the approach to be taken. It is often difficult and frustrating to impose the routine of keeping statisitics on the very non-routine job of reference. Furthermore most reference librarians are very busy and demands on their time are uncontrolled. Under these circumstances even a form that takes "only a few minutes to fill out" seems like an impossible burden if it must be done for every question, every day. I feel that the committee should take these problems into consideration and try to develop a means of measuring reference which will not place an

unjust burden on the reference librarian but which will retain the potential to supply detailed statistics on the reference process.

One way to do this would be to collect only the most basic and routine statistics on a day-to-day basis: for example, number of questions handled, classified by rough breakdowns of amount of time spent on each question. If the committee intends to specify a minimum number of statistics to be collected by all libraries, which is probably a good idea, definitions of terms should be unambiguous and the form should be flexible so that individual libraries can add additional statistics which they feel are essential to their own internal operations. These minimum statistics could then be supplemented by a series of sample statistics collected once, twice, or somewhat more times a year. As a matter of fact, many libraries already do collect sample statistics, and many more may wish to do so, but because there is no comprehensive set of statistics available each library must spend valuable time designing its own, and not every library has members on its staff who are skilled in doing this. Furthermore, once the sample statistics are collected there is no basis for comparison between libraries. There should be standard forms and definitions for the collection of these sample statistics and they should cover all conceivable aspects of a library's public service program, for example, types of materials used to answer questions, some kind of subject area distribution of questions answered and unanswered, classifications of patrons and their needs, and some follow up to determine if, within their viewpoint, their needs have been met. A library would then be able to pick the types of statistics that have relevance for its own operations, and having done so, it would be assured that the statistics it collects would be comparable with other libraries

To conclude, then, the reference supervisor needs a nationally recognized program for the measurement of reference services which can be accepted without hostility by the individual reference librarian and which, at the same time, will provide enough de-

tailed data, comparable with other libraries, to satisfy his or her own administrative needs for evaluation and planning and also those of all higher administrative levels within the library.